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The Road to War in Ukraine — The History of NATO and US Military Exercises With Ukraine — Part 3

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21–26 minutes

The ten-year period — 2011 -2021 — marked a dramatic surge in the size of the Ukrainian military. Although the number of active duty soldiers stabilized at 200,000 starting in 2018, the Ukrainian reserves grew by a factor of 10. These reserves were made possible by Ukraine's annual military training with NATO and USEUCOM forces. The stage was set for going to war with Russia.

In 2010, the size of the Ukrainian army (Armed Forces of Ukraine) was approximately **245,000 personnel**. This figure reflects the continued downsizing and restructuring that followed Ukraine's independence, as the government reduced the military from its Soviet-era levels. By the end of 2013, the number had dropped further to around 165,500 total personnel,

including about 120,900 active military members, highlighting the significant decline during this period.

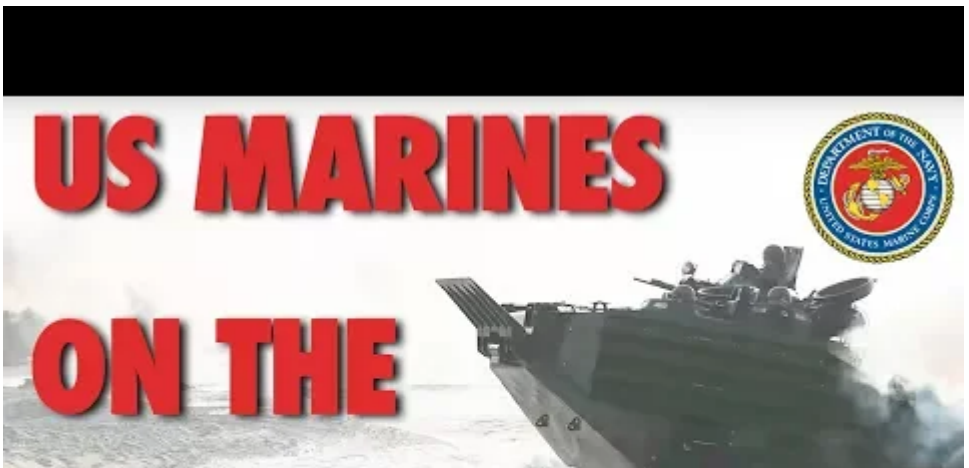
In 2010, the size of the Ukrainian army reserves was very limited. According to official plans, Ukraine aimed to have 6,300 reservists in 2010, but by the end of that year, only 1,681 reservists were actually in place-just 27% of the planned number. This reflects the fact that, at the time, Ukraine did not maintain a large, well-trained reserve force, and the system for professional reservists was still being developed.

By January 2022, just before the full-scale Russian invasion, a dramatic transformation had taken place. The Ukrainian Armed Forces had an estimated **active personnel strength of approximately 200,000 to 250,000**, but its pool of reservists had surged to 900,000.

The International Peacekeeping and Security Center (IPSC) in Yavoriv, Ukraine, which was established in **2007**, gained importance during the decade starting in 2011. It was created to serve as a major training facility for Ukrainian and international military units, supporting multinational exercises and peacekeeping training. The IPSC remained a central hub for joint training activities, including large annual exercises such as Rapid Trident, until Russia attacked it with a missile on March 13, 2022.

The annual military exercise in the Black Sea, i.e., *SEA BREEZE*, shifted in 2017 from maritime security, anti-piracy, and naval interoperability objectives to amphibious warfare and anti-submarine warfare. NATO could no longer pretend that it was just a *defensive* organization. Amphibious and anti-submarine warfare are offensive operations.

Here is a video of the US Marines landing on Ukraine's Black Sea coast in 2017:



2011

COMBINED ENDEAVOR (May 2011 – Communications-focused)

- **Location:** Grafenwöhr, Germany (Ukraine participated as a partner nation).
- **Focus:** NATO interoperability in communications and information systems.

RAPID TRIDENT (June 20–July 1, 2011)

- **Location:** Yavoriv Training Area, Ukraine (near Lviv)
- **Participants:** The exercise involved approximately 1,600 personnel from Ukraine, the United States, and other NATO and Partnership for Peace (PfP) nations, including Latvia, Belarus, Moldova, Slovenia, Canada, Georgia, Poland, Serbia, the United Kingdom, Lithuania, Estonia, as well as the California and Utah National Guards and U.S. Air Force Europe.
- **Focus:** Multinational interoperability, peacekeeping operations, and joint command procedures.
- **Significance:** Part of the U.S.-Ukraine **“Sea Breeze”** and **“Rapid Trident”** series, enhancing Ukraine’s ability to work with NATO forces.
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SEA BREEZE 2011 (July 6–16, 2011)

- **Location:** Black Sea (Odessa region) and Myrhorod Air Base, Ukraine.
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S. (USEUCOM-led), NATO allies (including Turkey, Romania), and other partners.
- **Focus:** Maritime security, anti-piracy, and air defense operations.
- **Significance:** Aimed at improving naval and air force coordination in crisis

scenarios.

2012

Rapid Trident (July 2012)

- **Location:** Yavoriv Training Area, Ukraine (near Lviv)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, NATO members (including the U.S.), and Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries.
- **Focus:** Joint multinational peacekeeping and stability operations, enhancing interoperability with NATO forces.
- **Significance:** Part of the annual U.S.-Ukraine bilateral exercise program under the **Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U)** initiative.

Sea Breeze 2012 (July 2012)

- **Location:** Black Sea (Odessa and Mykolaiv regions, Ukraine)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S. (USEUCOM & U.S. Navy), NATO allies, and partner nations.
- **Focus:** Maritime security, counter-piracy, and naval interoperability.
- **Significance:** A long-running U.S.-Ukraine co-hosted exercise promoting regional stability in the Black Sea.

Saber Guardian/Rapid Reaction 2012 (June-July 2012)

- **Location:** Novo Selo Training Area, Bulgaria (multinational, with Ukrainian participation)
- **Participants:** U.S. Army Europe, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and other NATO/PfP nations.
- **Focus:** Combined arms training, command post exercises, and rapid deployment operations.

Other Engagements:

- Ukraine also participated in NATO's **Partnership for Peace (PfP)** drills and **Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC)** events, focusing on defense reforms and interoperability.

2013

Exercise Rapid Trident (2013)

- **Date:** July 2013
- **Location:** International Peacekeeping and Security Center (IPSC), Yavoriv, Ukraine
- **Participants:** Ukraine, NATO members (including the U.S.), and Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries.
- **Focus:** Interoperability, peacekeeping operations, and joint command procedures.
- **Details:** This annual U.S.-led exercise aimed to enhance cooperation between Ukrainian forces and NATO allies, focusing on peace support and stability operations.

Exercise Sea Breeze (2013)

- **Date:** July 2013
- **Location:** Black Sea region (Odessa and Mykolaiv areas, Ukraine)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S. Navy (6th Fleet), and other NATO partners.
- **Focus:** Maritime security, anti-piracy, and naval interoperability.
- **Details:** A U.S.-Ukraine co-hosted exercise involving naval, air, and ground forces to improve Black Sea security cooperation.

Exercise Saber Guardian / Rapid Reaction (2013)

- **Date:** June–July 2013
- **Location:** Multiple locations in Europe, including Ukraine's participation.
- **Focus:** Multinational command post and field training exercises.

- **Details:** Part of a broader NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) effort, involving U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) and allied forces.

Other Cooperative Drills

- Ukraine also engaged in smaller-scale NATO-Ukraine exercises, including **medical, logistics, and command post training** under the **NATO-Ukraine Annual National Program (ANP)**.

2014

In 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Ukraine intensified its military cooperation with NATO and the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM). Several key exercises were conducted to enhance interoperability and strengthen Ukraine's defense capabilities. Here are the notable exercises from that year:

Exercise Sea Breeze (July–August 2014)

- **Location:** Black Sea (near Odessa)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S. (USEUCOM/NATO), and other allied nations.
- **Focus:** Maritime security operations, including anti-submarine warfare, search and rescue, and naval interoperability.
- **Significance:** Conducted amid heightened tensions in the Black Sea region following Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Exercise Rapid Trident (September 2014)

- **Location:** International Peacekeeping and Security Center (IPSC), Yavoriv, Ukraine
- **Participants:** Ukraine, NATO members (including the U.S.), and partner nations.
- **Focus:** Joint multinational training to improve interoperability with NATO forces, including field maneuvers, peacekeeping operations, and counterinsurgency tactics.

- **Significance:** This was part of the long-running Rapid Trident series, but the 2014 iteration took on greater importance due to the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

Exercise Fearless Guardian (Planned for 2015, but preparations began in late 2014)

- **Background:** Although officially launched in April 2015, planning and initial coordination with U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) started in late 2014.
- **Focus:** Training Ukrainian National Guard units in counterinsurgency and defensive operations, with U.S. Army instructors.

Other NATO-Ukraine Cooperation in 2014

- **NATO Trust Funds for Ukraine:** Established to support military rehabilitation, logistics, and cyber defense.
- **Increased U.S. Military Aid:** The U.S. began providing non-lethal assistance (e.g., body armor, medical supplies, and communications equipment) and stepped up advisory missions.

2015

The exercises were part of NATO's response to Russia's support for the Ukrainian militia in the Donbas, aimed at improving Ukraine's military capabilities and interoperability with Western forces. They also signaled Western support for Ukraine amid ongoing conflict in Donbas.

Fearless Guardian 2015 (April–November 2015)

- **Location:** Yavoriv Training Area, Ukraine
- **Participants:** U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR), Ukrainian Armed Forces, and other NATO partners.
- **Focus:** Training Ukrainian National Guard units in defensive tactics, medical aid, and countering hybrid threats.
- **Significance:** Part of the U.S. **Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF)** program to bolster Ukraine's military readiness.

Saber Guardian/Rapid Griffin (July 2015)

- **Location:** Multiple locations in Europe, including Ukraine.
- **Participants:** U.S. Army Europe, Ukrainian forces, and other Eastern European allies.
- **Focus:** Large-scale multinational maneuvers to enhance regional security and NATO-Ukraine cooperation.

Rapid Trident 2015 (September 2015)

- **Location:** Yavoriv Combat Training Center, Ukraine (near Lviv)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S., NATO allies, and partner nations (over 1,800 troops from 18 countries).
- **Focus:** Enhancing interoperability between Ukrainian forces and NATO, including command post exercises, field training, and peacekeeping operations.
- **Significance:** Part of the U.S.-led **Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U)** initiative to strengthen Ukraine's defense capabilities.

Sea Breeze 2015 (September 2015)

- **Location:** Black Sea (Odessa and Mykolaiv regions, Ukraine)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S. (Navy and Marines), NATO members (including Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and others).
- **Focus:** Maritime security, amphibious operations, and naval interoperability.
- **Significance:** Annual U.S.-Ukraine co-hosted exercise aimed at improving Black Sea security.

2016

The exercises in 2016 were part of NATO's broader support for Ukraine following Russia's aggression, emphasizing interoperability, defensive capabilities, and reforms aligned with NATO standards. The U.S. and

EUCOM played a central role in funding and organizing these drills.

Exercise Rapid Trident (2016)

- **Location:** Yavoriv Combat Training Center, Ukraine (near Lviv)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S., NATO allies, and partner nations (over 1,800 troops from 15 countries)
- **Focus:** Joint multinational interoperability, peacekeeping operations, and defensive drills.
- **Led by:** U.S. Army Europe (now U.S. Army Europe and Africa) in partnership with Ukraine.

Exercise Sea Breeze (2016)

- **Location:** Black Sea (hosted by Ukraine)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S. (Navy and Marines), NATO members (including Romania, Turkey, and others).
- **Focus:** Maritime security, anti-submarine warfare, amphibious operations, and naval interoperability.
- **Led by:** U.S. 6th Fleet and Ukrainian Navy.

Exercise Saber Guardian/Rapid Griffin (part of U.S.-led drills)

- While **Saber Guardian 2016** primarily involved Eastern European NATO allies (e.g., Romania, Bulgaria), Ukraine participated in related training under the **Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U)**, a U.S.-led effort to enhance Ukrainian Armed Forces' capabilities.

Exercise Fearless Guardian (2015–2016, ongoing training)

- Though officially launched in 2015 under the **U.S. Army Europe's Operation Atlantic Resolve**, this program continued into 2016, providing Ukrainian troops with training in counter-artillery, medical response, and tactical maneuvers.

Crisis Management Exercise (CMX) 2016

- Overview: A NATO-wide strategic political-military exercise to rehearse consultation and decision-making procedures. While not Ukraine-specific, Ukraine is a NATO partner and may have participated in related activities.

2017

The 2017 exercises were part of a broader strategy to enhance the readiness and interoperability of Ukrainian forces with NATO and partner nations in response Russia's support for the Donbas.

Sea Breeze 2017

- **Date:** July 10–22, 2017
- **Location:** Black Sea (Odessa and Mykolaiv regions, Ukraine)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S., NATO members (including Romania, Turkey, Bulgaria), and other partners.
- **Focus:** Maritime security operations, amphibious warfare, and anti-submarine warfare.

Saber Guardian 2017 (Part of *Allied Shield* exercises)

- **Date:** July 2017
- **Location:** Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria (Ukrainian observers participated)
- **Participants:** Multiple NATO members and partners.
- **Focus:** Large-scale multinational land operations, though Ukraine's role was limited compared to its involvement in other drills.

Rapid Trident 2017

- **Date:** September 2017
- **Location:** Yavoriv Combat Training Center, Ukraine (near Lviv)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S., NATO allies, and partner nations (over 2,500 troops from 15 countries).
- **Focus:** Enhancing interoperability between Ukrainian forces and NATO

through command post and field training exercises.

Joint Endeavor 2017 (Cyber Defense Exercise)

- **Date:** November 2017
- **Participants:** Ukraine, NATO Cyber Defense Center of Excellence (CCDCOE).
- **Focus:** Strengthening cyber defense capabilities against hybrid threats.

2018

The 2018 exercises were part of Ukraine's post-2014 push for NATO compatibility following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Donbas conflict. The U.S. and NATO emphasized "territorial defense" training, reflecting Ukraine's need to counter hybrid threats.

Exercise Rapid Trident (2018)

- **Location:** Yavoriv Combat Training Center, Ukraine (near Lviv)
- **Participants:** Over 2,200 troops from 14 nations, including Ukraine, the U.S., and other NATO allies.
- **Focus:** Joint multinational interoperability, peacekeeping operations, and defensive maneuvers.
- **Significance:** Part of the U.S.-led **European Reassurance Initiative (ERI)** to bolster Eastern European partners.

Exercise Sea Breeze (2018)

- **Location:** Black Sea (primarily near Odesa and Mykolaiv, Ukraine)
- **Participants:** Naval forces from Ukraine, the U.S., and other NATO members (e.g., Romania, Turkey).
- **Focus:** Maritime security, anti-submarine warfare, and amphibious operations.
- **Context:** Aimed at countering Russian dominance in the Black Sea post-2014 annexation of Crimea.

Exercise Joint Endeavor (2018)

- **Part of:** NATO's **Enhanced Opportunity Program (EOP)**, which included Ukraine as one of six "enhanced partners."
- **Focus:** Command post exercise (CPX) testing interoperability between NATO and Ukrainian forces in crisis response.

Exercise Saber Guardian (2018 – Limited Involvement)

- While primarily a U.S. Army Europe-led exercise in Bulgaria/Hungary/Romania, Ukrainian forces participated in related training events under NATO's framework.

Clear Sky 2018

- Conducted in mid-October 2018, primarily at Starokostiantyniv Air Base in western Ukraine.
- Marked Ukraine's largest aviation exercise to date, with participation from the United States and eight other nations (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine).
- Approximately 950 personnel took part, including robust participation from the California Air National Guard as part of the U.S. State Partnership Program.
- Focus areas included air interdiction, air-to-ground integration, air mobility operations, aeromedical evacuation, cyber defense, and personnel recovery.
- U.S. aircraft involved included F-15C Eagles, C-130J Super Hercules, KC-135s, and MQ-9 drones.

Other Multinational Exercises Involving Ukraine

- Iron Wolf 2018: A Lithuanian-led exercise held in November 2018 in Lithuania, involving around 3,500 troops from 13 NATO Allies and partner nation Ukraine. While not hosted in Ukraine, it included Ukrainian participation and focused on defensive operations and rapid mobility with

NATO battlegroups.

2019

Exercise Sea Breeze (July 2019)

- **Location:** Black Sea (Odesa and Mykolaiv regions)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S. (co-hosted with USEUCOM), and NATO allies (including UK, Canada, Turkey, and others).
- **Focus:** Maritime security operations, amphibious warfare, and anti-submarine warfare.

Exercise Saber Guardian (July 2019)

- **Location:** Multiple Eastern European countries (Ukraine participated in related drills)
- **Participants:** U.S. Army Europe (now U.S. Army Europe and Africa), NATO allies, and partners, including Ukraine.
- **Focus:** Large-scale multinational maneuvers to enhance readiness and coordination.

Exercise Rapid Trident (September 2019)

- **Location:** Yavoriv Combat Training Center, Ukraine
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S. (led by USEUCOM), and multiple NATO allies.
- **Focus:** Joint multinational training to enhance interoperability among NATO and partner nations, including command post exercises and field training.

Exercise Maple Arch 2019 (October-November 2019)

- **Location:** Poland (with Ukrainian participation)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, Poland, U.S., and other NATO partners.
- **Focus:** Air defense and joint operations training.

Exercise Joint Endeavor 2019 (November 2019)

- **Location:** Germany (but involved Ukrainian forces in NATO interoperability drills)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S., and NATO members.
- **Focus:** Command post exercise testing NATO's rapid reinforcement capabilities, including Ukrainian staff officers in NATO-led scenarios.

Other Related Exercises

The U.S. Army Europe also participated in a series of nine exercises in the Black Sea and Balkan regions during May and June 2019, including Immediate Response and Saber Guardian, but these were not specifically noted as involving Ukraine directly in the provided results.

2020

Exercise Sea Breeze 2020

- **Date:** July 2020 (initially scaled down due to COVID-19)
- **Location:** Black Sea region (Odessa, Mykolaiv, and nearby waters)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S. (Navy & Marines), NATO members (Romania, Turkey, Spain, etc.), and partners (Georgia).
- **Focus:** Maritime security, amphibious operations, and anti-submarine warfare.

Exercise Rapid Trident 2020

- **Date:** September 2020
- **Location:** Yavoriv Training Area, Western Ukraine
- **Participants:** Ukraine, U.S., NATO allies, and partner nations (including the UK, Canada, Poland, and others).
- **Focus:** Enhanced interoperability between Ukrainian forces and NATO, including command post exercises (CPX) and field training (FTX).

Exercise Maple Arch 2020 (Ukraine-Canada bilateral)

- **Date:** September 2020
- **Location:** Ukraine
- **Focus:** Tactical medical training and combat readiness.

Exercise Combined Resolve XIII (USEUCOM-led, with Ukrainian observers)

- **Date:** September-October 2020
- **Location:** Hohenfels Training Area, Germany
- **Focus:** Large-scale combat operations with NATO allies (Ukraine participated as an observer).

Exercise Joint Endeavor 2020

- **Date:** November 2020
- **Location:** Germany (virtual/command-post format due to pandemic)
- **Participants:** Ukraine, NATO members, and partners.
- **Focus:** Crisis response, command & control (C2), and multinational coordination.

Bomber Task Force Missions

- On September 4, 2020, U.S. Air Force B-52 Stratofortress bombers entered Ukrainian airspace for the first time, conducting a long flight along the borders of Crimea.
- These missions were part of broader U.S.-NATO bomber integration training across Europe, demonstrating U.S. commitment to security in the region and interoperability with NATO and Ukrainian forces.

2021

In 2021, Ukraine participated in several significant military exercises with **NATO** and **U.S. European Command (USEUCOM)**, reinforcing

interoperability and defense capabilities amid rising tensions with Russia.

Exercise Defender-Europe 2021 (May-June 2021)

- A large-scale U.S.-led multinational exercise across Europe, involving over **28,000 troops** from 26 nations.
- Ukraine contributed mechanized units and participated in drills focused on **joint maneuvers, logistics, and command operations**.
- Part of the exercise took place in **Yavoriv, Ukraine**, at the **International Peacekeeping and Security Center (IPSC)**, a key training hub for NATO-Ukraine cooperation.

Exercise Sea Breeze 2021 (June-July 2021)

- A major **naval and air exercise** co-hosted by Ukraine and the U.S. in the **Black Sea**.
- Involved **32 ships, 40 aircraft, and 5,000 troops** from over **30 countries** (including NATO members).
- Russia strongly opposed the drills, accusing NATO of escalating tensions in the region.

Exercise Rapid Trident 2021 (September 2021)

- An annual U.S.-Ukraine co-led exercise under the **Partnership for Peace (PfP) program**.
- Held at **Yavoriv Combat Training Center**, involving **6,000 troops** from 15 countries (including NATO members).
- Focused on **interoperability, peacekeeping, and defensive operations**.

Exercise Cossack Mace 2021 (October-November 2021)

- A **command-post exercise (CPX)** involving Ukrainian forces and NATO allies.
- Focused on **joint staff planning, crisis response, and hybrid warfare scenarios**.

Exercise Joint Endeavor 2021 (November 2021)

- A **communications and cybersecurity exercise** aimed at improving NATO-Ukraine coordination in electronic warfare and secure data exchange.

Additional Engagements

- *NATO Days* in Ukraine 2021: NATO teams visited Ukrainian Armed Forces Institutes, providing presentations and briefings to enhance cooperation and understanding

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